

EDUCATION ENTERPRISE: ACCOUNTABILITY AND THE PUBLIC DOLLAR IN NEW
WAVE EDUCATION

A CREATIVE PROJECT

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BY

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Introduction

That state of public and privatized education in the United States is undergoing substantial changes through education reform bills in the United States Congress and through the restructuring of public school systems across the country. There has been a call for education reform by parents, teachers and administrators and an overhaul of our public education system for decades. Charter schools are an educational phenomenon that emerged in the 1980's in the United States (Kahlenberg and Potter, 2014). While some charter schools are privatized, the majority of them are public charter schools that use millions of public education tax dollars every year (F.O.C.U.S., 2010). The documentary film produced, *Education Enterprise*, explores accountability in charter school development and leadership. This film attempts to explore and explain this educational phenomenon and to give information to viewers about the changing landscape of public school systems.

Public charter schools are operated through a somewhat complicated hierarchy that differs from that of a traditional public education institution. The school is partially funded and run by the school's authorizer and is also funded by taxpayer dollars (F.O.C.U.S., 2010). Every charter school has an authorizer, who is often a state university, school district, or public office entity, such as a mayor's office (Center for Public Education). The authorizer is responsible for allocating funds and renewing or declining a school's charter when it has run its course (Center for Public Education). Charters are usually issued for three to five years before needing to be reviewed for renewal (National Alliance for Public Education, 2014). Charter authorizers hold very little responsibility in the way that a school is run and the accountability is often placed

on the leadership within the school. That responsibility is also largely held by the school governance board, which can be made up of parents, faculty, and community members whom are usually not elected, but appointed to the board by the authorizer and school governing body. The school's faculty and staff are responsible for the day-to-day running of the institution and the governance board makes sure that the staff is on top of academic performance and meeting standards. The school's authorizer keeps an eye on financial decisions and meeting state standards in academics. They are also responsible for making the toughest decisions of all about when a school needs to close its doors.

When an authorizer determines that a charter is not to be renewed and that a school must shut down, who is then held responsible for the mishaps and poor performance of the school? This is still relatively unclear. Authorizers are generally not held accountable for anything that is not related to the finances of the school and governance boards shift the blame back to the authorizers, who often will not visit a school under their charter more than once or at all for reviews within its charter period. Many charter schools do succeed in communities however, and their successes can often be traced back to an authorizer that has established a good relationship with that educational institution and with the community, with strong accountability.

To explore this topic further, my creative project takes the form of a documentary film. This documentary seeks to define a public charter school and some of the issues of accountability that come with the opening and sustainability of public charter schools. The film is not designed to lead the viewers to believe that public charter schools are either right or wrong, but rather to raise some questions about how they function. The audience is invited to draw their own conclusions and opinions.

This project is important and significant for the documentary discipline and field of video production because it is something that has not been widely explored or discussed. There have been several documentary films made about charter schools (see literature review) but none that I have encountered focused on accountability between charter schools and their authorizers. I knew that this topic was going to be challenging to explore but I wanted to bring issues of accountability for those with children in our public school system. I also wanted the documentary to connect with taxpayers; the people that help fund charter schools.

There were several goals of this documentary project. The aesthetic goal of this project is to have it be visually pleasing and presentable to a public audience and to have it contain production value that is of the expectations of graduate student work. The film is designed to have a flow and not be jarring in the information that is being presented. The narrative goal of this project is to tell the story of charter schools and accountability. The goal of this project within the framework of storytelling is to have the narrative be easy enough to understand for someone outside of the education discipline. It is also important that the concepts and thoughts relayed through the interviews be thought provoking and interesting to the viewer. Another goal of this film is to entice people to ask more questions and to investigate these issues of accountability and education within public charter schools further on their own. As I was creating this film, it was important to me to remain as objective as I could with the content of the narrative and to craft a story that did not necessarily provide a lot of definitive answers, but rather provides viewers with a lot to think and ask about when they walk away from the film.

This film covers several facets of charter school education and how it functions within a public school system. The literature review to follow is broken down into the various concepts that explored in the film.

Literature Review

Education Reform and Autonomy

The face of public education in the United States has been transforming for a couple of decades. This evolution has encompassed new tactics, including school autonomy and public charter schools. The concept of school autonomy is not new and is a concept that has been explored and implemented in Indianapolis for several years (Turner, 2015). Studies from a variety of education think tanks across the country, such as the CREDO (Center for Research on Education Outcomes) study, indicate that school autonomy empowers teachers, faculty, and even parents to be more invested in the educational future of that facility and educational institution (Allen, 2011).

Adding charter schools in a public school district often follows alongside a move towards school autonomy (Colombo, 2015). Studies have indicated that a move towards school autonomy attracts better faculty and empowering the school to make more of its own core decisions will “improve the overall educational outlook” for the school (Colombo, 2015). It is often implied by education reform institutions that the implementation of autonomous schools and charter schools into a public school district will lessen restrictions and increase accountability among faculty and administration (F.O.C.U.S., 2010). Charter school opponents argue that giving schools that much more power and autonomy will lead to less accountability and will increase the possibility for corruption and fraud (Higgins, 2015).

Defining Public Charter Schools

Public charter schools are a mystery to most of the general public and many people do not understand that charter schools are, in fact, public schools. The Center for Public Education defines a charter school as a “non-religious public school opening under a contract or “charter” that governs its operation” (Center for Public Education, 2010). The Center for Education Reform adds that, “they are free to attend, open to the public, and are mostly funded by taxpayer dollars. In addition, they must follow state laws and standards but have more flexible funding options and are given autonomy to make decisions for their own students and school, based on what is outlined and allowed by the school’s charter authorizer” (Center for Public Education, 2010).

Almost 100% autonomy is a factor that leads many people to believe that charter schools are private institutions. In fact, they are largely paid for by public dollars. Funding for each student that attends a public charter school follows them from the public school they were attending into the charter school (Whitehurst, 2012). A large part of what this film explains is how the charter schools are funded and what their structure actually looks like within a public school system. An important part of producing *Education Enterprise* is to educate the public about where their taxpayer dollars are going in their communities and to help create a conversation about public education in all of its forms.

The Need for Charter Schools

The Century Foundation claims that charter schools educate more low-income and minority students than traditional public schools in the same public school system and that

charter schools are providing a necessary school choice option for minority students and students with special needs and behavioral problems (Kahlenberg and Potter, 2012).

Charter school authorizing groups also authorize schools that serve specific students and student needs, such as schools for at-risk youth, such as the Francis Marion Academy that has been established by the Indianapolis Charter School Board, which will serve students who are moving through the juvenile court system and who have other behavioral problems (Weddle, 2014). The autonomy that is inherent with charter schools allows for the school to provide specialized classes and character development that would not otherwise be provided in a traditional public school settings (Tough, 2014).

While many studies show that charter schools usually perform about the same as other traditional public schools within its school systems (Layton, 2013), charter school advocates, such as the Center for Education Reform, argue that it is about more than test scores and academic performance (Center for Education Reform). They claim that they are serving other needs of their students, such as character development, smaller class sizes, and a safe school environment (Center for Education Reform). There are undeniable gaps that need to be filled in public education.

Traditional Public School vs. Charter School

While charter schools are, legally speaking, public schools, there are several differences between traditional public schools and public charter schools. Traditional public schools are accountable to the school district that they reside in and their funding is almost entirely determined by the school district. Public charter schools have flexible funding and are granted more unrestricted funds from taxpayer dollars than traditional public schools. Public charter

schools have more autonomy in how the school is run and operated but both traditional public schools and public charter schools must abide by state assessment standards and testing laws.

While charter schools and related laws have been implemented throughout the majority of the country, the state of Washington's Supreme Court was the first to rule that charter schools are unconstitutional because they are not governed by elected school boards and that makes them unaccountable to voters (Brown, 2015). This ruling refueled the debate about what makes a public school public and the role of public oversight in public education. One objective of *Education Enterprise* is to be a part of the conversation about what makes public school public and how do we work with charter schools within a public school system.

Funding

Funding for public charter schools is complicated at best and according to the Salt Lake Tribune, charter school budgets are a "black hole" of public information and confusion (Wood, 2015). Private educational companies that may be working with a charter school are less eager to share their books and information with the public outside of the standard reports required by the state for the school to report (Wood, 2015). There are little to no records of the number or scope of charter management companies operating in each state and some of those operations go unreported to the state since the work and money is being moved through a private organization or corporation (Wood, 2015). Because charter school funding comes from a variety of sources, it is difficult for the public to access a breakdown of funding sources and information.

Furthermore, it is even harder for anyone to read and interpret the budgets once they get their hands on them. Public charter schools do receive the majority of their funding through taxpayer

dollars, but facilities must be paid for by private donations or other grants, as most states do not provide funding for the facility for a charter school.

For some states, the lack of accountability and transparency in funding is becoming a problem, such as Washington state, where charter schools are being viewed as “Unconstitutional” by the state Supreme Court (Higgins, 2015). Chief Justice Madsen stated that, “money that is dedicated to common schools is unconstitutionally diverted to charter schools” (Higgins, 2015). The Supreme Court of Washington decided that the funding for public charter schools was convoluted and the schools were operating with more private operations and funding than common schools that were receiving the same public dollars (Higgins, 2015). Similar decisions were reached in other states, such as Georgia, who later enacted legislature that reinstated a state commission to oversee the authorization of charter schools in their state (Higgins, 2015.) These provisions can mean less funding for public charter schools on a state level.

Charter schools on average receive less public per-pupil funding than their traditional public school counterparts (Resmovits, 2014). Even though charter schools are receiving public dollars, they do not have as many restrictions on how those dollars are implemented into the school as a traditional public school does. Is this equitable and does it promote accountability? The film will explore these aspects of funding.

School Closure and Accountability

Charter school authorization is not risk-free and, inherently, failures and closures often follow. Most charter schools are given a charter of 3-5 years to perform at the level that the

authorizer expects. If they do not perform up to those standards, their school will likely not have their charter renewed and the school may close.

The closure of charter schools often leads to taxpayer dollars and donation/grant dollars wasted, and it leaves children and parents in a bad position of once again having to change schools for their children. Charter schools often complain that they received no warning that their charter would not be renewed and that the charter authorizer often did not visit more than one or two times during the entire authorization period (Stokes, 2013). So who is to be held accountable for the closure?

Other Documentary/Creative Projects Related to This Topic:

- *Waiting for Superman (2010)*- This documentary film had an unusually large audience for a documentary and was about the state of public education in the United States. The film is pro-charter and uses emotional appeals by showcasing several students who are waiting to find out if they made it into the charter schools in their school district to save them from a bad fate in the public school system. The proposed documentary creative project will not have as narrow of a point of view and will be decidedly less biased.
- *The Lottery (2010)*- This film follows several families as they go through steps to try to get into Harlem's famous Success Academy Charter Schools via the school lottery. It takes viewers through what it is like for each family who is struggling to find the right school and shows why they feel they need for their child to be in that school.

- *Beating the Odds (2012)*- This film showcases three high performance urban charter schools in Boston that serve students in low-income areas. It is a pro charter film that explores how specialized learning environments in these schools leads to success.
- *Rebirth: New Orleans (2013)*- This film takes viewers through how the majority of New Orleans public schools became public charter school districts after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, which provided an opportunity for school districts to start over with a clean slate and enabled them to try something different. This film goes through the successes, failures, and trials that occurred as the schools changed over to charter. This film has a very specific and narrow point of view but also has some national ties and statistics, which is the hope for this creative project as well.

Education Enterprise is providing a narrative that is focused on accountability of charter school authorizers and in charter school structure. The documentaries discussed above do not have a focus on accountability in charter schools. Each of the above documentaries has a very specific and biased point of view, while *Education Enterprise* is providing a variety of information for viewers to draw their own conclusions.

Documented Literature

There is some documented literature and research out there about charter school accountability and authorization accountability, such as *Accountability for All: 2016-The Broken Promise of Michigan's Charter Sector* by The Education Trust (The Education Trust-Midwest)

and *Improving Charter School Accountability: The Challenge of Closing Failing Schools* by The Progressive Policy Institute (Osborne, 2012). These works explore accountability in charter school creation, leadership and authorization. While several documentary films, such as the ones listed above, have been produced about charter schools and charter school growth in the United States, none of them specifically focus on issues of accountability and how public charter schools fit into the framework of our traditional public school system.

The Problem Space

The problem space for this creative project is the issue of accountability in charter school education and authorization. There has been some research done about the high rate in which the charter schools fail/close and about how the charter school governing hierarchy does not necessarily lend itself to holding people accountable for failing schools (Popular Democracy, 2014). This film delves deeper into authorization accountability, or lack thereof, and gives more of an overview explanation about how charter schools are run and authorized. While information about those things is out there, bringing those ideas together into one film and explaining and exploring them side by side helps viewers to make informed decisions and choices about public education and charter education. This film provides perspective on how accountability in leadership and authorization can affect parents, teachers and children as well.

Methodology

My primary approach for this creative project was to collect interviews with charter school professionals, children, teachers, and administrators at charter schools and educational facilities. The goal has always been to have a documentary as the medium to deliver the story of

charter school accountability and functionality within American public school systems. It was important to be able to educate the public through a documentary film rather than an article or written summation. The documentary format lends itself to a more thorough form of storytelling that also shows viewers the passionate and political nature of the conversation about public charter education among educational experts and enthusiasts. I knew going into production the kinds of questions I wanted to ask about accountability and structure. I had a good idea about the questions in which I would ask each interviewee. This allowed me to craft the narrative of the documentary as I was still in the production process.

Technical and Aesthetic Approach

The development and completion of this documentary film followed a process that is fairly standard in documentary filmmaking. The project began development in the spring of 2015 with 2-3 months of research and analysis about the subject matter, possible interview candidates, and other creative works that have been completed about charter schools and education reform. I then found a director of photography and audio engineer to be on the crew for the film, as well as several other helping hands to fill in for crew. I then confirmed interview subjects and dates and times to conduct the interviews with each of them. I composed individualized interview questions for each subject and used similar questions across the board that would fit with the narrative of the film and would relate to areas of charter school education that I wanted to explore in the film. I was conducting interviews, collecting data and research, and shooting b-roll until early October 2015. I then moved into the post production and review process, which involved securing someone to color grade the film, record sound and engineer the stereo mix of the film, create graphics, write voice over narration, and assist in the overall editing of the

documentary. It took about four months to complete the finalized editing of the film, with graphics, narration, colored footage, credits, and a proper stereo sound mix. This development strategy and process is common in the production world, although larger scale productions would have already had the post-production crew confirmed and prepared before production began.

It was been important that the viewer was not lead in any particular direction, with the deployment of aesthetics that would solicit a specific emotional response. I did not want to shoot or edit the film in a way that would lead the viewer to feel positively or negatively by looking at the footage. I did not want the b-roll or interviews to be made to look ominous or overly cheerful and unrealistic. I want the film to be perceived as “natural,” and I do not wish to create blatantly negative or positive tones based on the look and feel of the footage itself. If viewers come to a negative or positive conclusion on their own, I do not want it to be because they were influenced by how a shot looked or felt, but rather by the words of the interviewees and narration.

Discussion of Project

This creative project is a documentary that was produced to educate the public about public charter schools and their place in the public education system. The documentary begins by defining a public charter school. It then explains how a public charter school is created in a public school system. Interviewees discuss the growth of charter school education in the United States and how charter schools operate differently than traditional public schools. Administration and experts explain charter school autonomy and success. As the viewer approaches the halfway point in the documentary, the narrative shifts to discuss accountability and authorization of charter schools. The viewer hears from administration of charter schools that are soon to be shut down and from charter school authorizers that discuss school closures. The documentary

concludes by sharing the growth trends in charter schools in the United States and that charter schools are not going anywhere anytime soon.

Education Enterprise was filmed over the course of six months and took about four months to edit and finalize. The majority of the interviews and b-roll were shot on Black Magic Cinema Cameras, however some b-roll was shot on a Nikon D5100. The overall editing of the narrative, footage, and interviews was done on Adobe Premiere Pro. The sound design was edited on Pro Tools. The color grading was completed in Adobe Premiere Pro. The final run time of the documentary is 20 minutes and APM Music provided all music for the film. The Director of Photography for *Education Enterprise* was Jillian Clark. Adrian Blackwell and Carolyn Case did additional photography. Adrian Blackwell and Acie Eoff did the audio. Adrian Blackwell did the color grading. Walter Bender and Chris Flook did the graphics. The documentary was directed, produced, edited, and written by Carolyn Case.

The problem space for this creative project was accountability and authorization in charter school education. I needed to find a way to use what I have learned in the Digital Storytelling program to create an educational documentary whose purpose was to inform, not to persuade. I filled this problem space by creating a documentary that is informative about charter school accountability and that defines a charter school for viewers who may not have an educational background. I also filled this problem space by crafting a narrative that is informative but not overtly biased or persuasive. I believe that there is a lot more exploration to be done on this topic and that a follow-up film would be beneficial. The topic of accountability in charter schools is vast and highly political. It requires a longer time frame of maybe three of four years to comprehensively research this topic and create a more thorough documentary exploration of charter school accountability across the United States.

Conclusion

Education Enterprise is a film that has been produced to create a conversation about charter schools and their place in public education. The film also serves to educate the public about what a charter school is and how it functions within a public education system. The film explores accountability in public charter school authorization, structure and performance. Investigating who is being held accountable for the authorization of charters and how the charters are carried out over the course of a 3 or 5-year term is critical in understanding charter school rationale and the successes/failures of the school choice movement.

Another part of this film is the need for more information to be available about charter schools for the public. I think it is important that this documentary serves to help people better understand the choices they will be making for their children in choosing their schools and the knowledge of how charter schools operate. I also believe citizens have the right to know and understand where all of their public education dollars generated by taxes are going.

This documentary film project encompasses the skills I have learned throughout my time in the Digital Storytelling program. I utilized production and post-production skills, as well as research methods and data collection. Producing this film has reiterated my passion for storytelling and has reignited my belief that film can be a powerful educational tool. This film can be used to inform the public and to possibly create conversations that could be catalysts for change or reform in our public school systems.

Finally, an important part of this film is all of the powerful and compelling interviews with people from various sides of the charter school debate. Charter school authorization is a highly political issue and it is important to conduct interviews that relay important factual

information to the viewers, as well as show the emotional struggles and hardships that come with these debates. This film aims to be a small part of a national conversation about the future of public of education.

While I believe *Education Enterprise* has helped bridge the gap of the problem space of accountability in charter education, I think there is more work to be done and pursued by other filmmakers in the future. Subject matter of this depth and complication requires a lot of time, research, and resources, financial and otherwise. Had I known the complexities of these educational issues prior to starting the film, I would have likely tabled it or chosen a different area of focus. I believe a film about accountability and the changing landscape of public education in the United States requires at least 3-4 years of production time to get a vast amount of interview material, statistical information and enough data and expert opinions to form answers to viewer questions and to craft a solid argument for or against public charter school implementation in the traditional public school system. I believe that my crew and myself did the best work that we could accomplish in such a short time frame. I hope this film can be a catalyst to inspire other documentarians to explore these issues further and to take an even deeper look at charter school accountability and public education reform.

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